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## Spirituality, drugs, and tourism: tourists' and shamans' experiences of ayahuasca in Iquitos, Peru

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### ABSTRACT

This study critically evaluates the complex inter space of spirituality, drugs, and tourism through tourists' and shamans' accounts of ayahuasca tourism in Iquitos, Peru. Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic beverage traditionally consumed for spiritual and health purposes. Using micro-ethnography, one of the researchers was immersed for one month in the tourism experience of ayahuasca. The findings reveal the ambivalent nature of tourists' experiences and the changing meaning and practices of ayahuasca. Tourists' encounters with ayahuasca were perceived as spiritual due to better understanding and perception of 'self' and 'others'. Shamans' encounters with tourists were mostly positive but negative consequences on their practices were evident. The study highlights issues of fluidity, positionality, and self-identification of roles in tourism.

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Spirituality; drugs; ayahuasca; binary thinking; tourism impacts; Peru

### Introduction

*Ayahuasca* is a word from the language of the Quechua people, a group indigenous to the Amazonian regions of Peru and Ecuador (Metzner, 1999). It refers to a hallucinogenic beverage, commonly known as 'ayahuasca tea' (Tupper, 2008), prominent in the ethnomedicine and shamanism of the indigenous Amazonian tribes (McKenna, 2004). 'Ayahuasca tourism' is increasing (Tupper, 2008) and the experience usually involves a shaman-led ceremony in which tourists and locals drink the hallucinogenic tea (Holman, 2011). A typical tourist experience consists of rituals and ceremonies often preceded by a *dieta*, a fasting with a non-hallucinogenic traditional medicinal plant (*Asojacha* or *Cumaceba*). Rituals invariably incorporate chanting or singing of *icaros* – special songs through which healing, divination, or connecting with the spirits may be effected (Dobkin de Rios, 1992; Luna, 1986). The rituals conducted by a shaman, or *ayahuascero*, who uses shamanic practices (e.g. group rituals, relaxation, and social bonding at physiological and psychosocial levels) to heal tourists (Winkelman, 2001) are designed to outlast the psychoactive effects of ayahuasca (Anderson et al., 2012).

The area of Iquitos, Peru, is one of many places where ayahuasca 'retreats' are located. Visitors at such retreats are in search of 'authentic', 'extraordinary', 'remarkable', and 'unusual' facets of life (Grunwell, 1998; Winkelman, 2005). The explanation of ayahuasca's effects by Amazonian indigenous people reflects a

paradigm involving spiritual domains and supernatural forces (Tupper, 2008) in which shamans act as gatekeepers and/or cultural brokers of the experience. Although there is no evidence that the consumption of ayahuasca is addictive (Gable, 2007), the tea contains monoamine oxidase (MOA) that activates the hallucinogen dimethyltryptamine (DMT), considered a drug by the scientific community (McKenna, 2004). Despite the illegality of ayahuasca in most Western countries (Labate & Feeney, 2012), it is increasingly used for recreational and spiritual purposes (McKenna, 2004). Ayahuasca has also become part of the broader medical and psychological interest in the shamanistic model and its implications for cultural psychiatry and indigenous healing practices (Labate & Cavnar, 2014). The issues surrounding ayahuasca therefore occupy a significant interspace between several research communities including ethical, spiritual, religious, and therapeutic issues, all of which serve to inform, mediate, and construct the often contested tourism practices and understandings of the experience.

Depending on positionality, the ayahuasca experience can be portrayed as either a pathway to spirituality and well-being or a drug/recreational experience (Prayag, Mura, Hall, & Fontaine, 2015; Winkelman, 2005). Both spirituality as an element of the touristic experience (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Norman, 2011; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013) and drug tourism are relatively under researched

(Belhassen, Santos, & Uriely, 2007; Prayag et al., 2015; Uriely & Belhassen, 2006). Drug tourism can be described as tourist experiences involving the awareness, consumption, and usage of drugs that are considered illegal or illegitimate in either the destination or the tourist's country of origin (Uriely & Belhassen, 2005). From this perspective, ayahuasca tourism is a form of drug tourism. However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Belhassen et al., 2007; Uriely & Belhassen, 2005), previous studies on drug tourism (e.g. Korf, 2002; Valdez & Sifaneck, 1997) fail to acknowledge that drug-induced tourism experiences can be meaningful and life changing. In fact, the use of psychedelics can be part of one's lifestyle to induce transcendence (Aaslid, 2008) or transformative experiences (e.g. rave and trance culture) and to show adherence to spiritual practices. Although altered states are situationally contingent and primarily subjective experiences, drug research has been dominated by epidemiological methods, which leaves little space for inter-subjectivity or reflexivity (Aaslid, 2012). Hence, ayahuasca tourism occupies a fluid inter space that provides a spiritual, healing, recreational or drug experience, or potentially none of these.

The potential contradictions between spirituality, usually regarded as a positive process that leads to a life-long 'growth of the self' (Luna, 1986; Winkelmann, 2005), and drug tourism, often portrayed as a deviant or hedonistic escape for Western tourists (Belhassen et al., 2007; Dobkin de Rios, 1994), have been little discussed. An examination of ayahuasca tourism therefore provides an opportunity to challenge static binary thinking in tourism and emphasises the fluidity of categories and concepts, tourism's impacts, and the tourist experience (Caton & Santos, 2008; Waitt & Duffy, 2010). While studies on tourism and ayahuasca do exist (e.g. Holman, 2011; Prayag et al., 2015), relatively little research has been undertaken to unveil both tourists' and shamans' experiences of ayahuasca. Accordingly, the two research questions guiding this study are: In what way(s) is the tourism experience of ayahuasca spiritual to tourists?; and, How do tourists and shamans perceive ayahuasca tourism? By doing so, the study highlights the interplay between Western (tourist) and indigenous (shamanic) epistemologies and the potential for shifts in meaning of the tourist experience even over a relatively short period of time (Belhassen et al., 2007). It also highlights the importance of understanding the interspace between fields and actors (e.g. tourist, host community, and shaman as cultural broker), as spaces of ongoing fluidity and social construction.

## Literature review

### *Spirituality and tourism experiences*

Spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to questions about life, meaning, and the relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community (King & Crowther, 2004). Spirituality is an extremely complex, multi-dimensional, and sometimes contested phenomenon, that escapes easy definition (Hill et al., 2000). From a religious perspective, spirituality resonates with notions of a lived experience, harmonious interconnectedness, belief or affirmation of life existence and intuitive alignment of sensibilities (Singh & Singh, 2009). Spirituality involves a search process that may include the search for meaning, self or a better world (Hill et al., 2000). Spirituality can emerge outside of religious contexts (Sharp-ley & Jepson, 2011) from personal contact with nature, culture and people (Ivakhiv, 2003), with the journeying involved in the travel experience itself also potentially being spiritual (Jepson & Sharp-ley, 2015; Singh & Singh, 2009; Willson et al., 2013).

Though spirituality has been considered in studies of religious tourism (e.g. Stausberg, 2011; Swatos & Tomasi, 2002; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), few attempts have been made to understand the way in which individuals seek or experience spiritual fulfilment through tourism (Sharp-ley & Jepson, 2011). Singh and Singh (2009) observed that studies on tourism to sacred sites/destinations tend to conclude that pilgrim behaviours are not so different from tourists. Likewise, travels, visits, and pilgrimages to sacred places may not always yield spiritual experiences (Singh & Singh, 2009). The motivational and experiential aspects, combined with a self-described lack of affiliation with any organised religion, differentiate the spiritual tourist from either the religious tourist or the modern pilgrim (Holman, 2011). Tourists can experience spirituality from various facets of the tourism experience. Willson (2011), for example, found that the travel experience can assist in the inner quest for peace through a spiritual centre that acts as an instrument of healing from excessive secular and materialistic environments. In this way, for example, spirituality can emerge from the experience of place through a sense of renewal and *communitas*, feelings of being blessed and part of something bigger/infinite, and the appreciation of creation and a sense of timeliness/scale (Heintzman, 2000; Jepson & Sharp-ley, 2015; Sharp-ley & Jepson, 2011). Through feelings of connectedness, the search for meaning and life purpose, and the experience of life-changing moments, Willson et al. (2013) identified that

the travel experience can be spiritual. Collectively studies on tourist experiences and pilgrimages suggest that spirituality emerges from interactions with nature and inner journeys of transformation and/or discovery of the self. In these studies, the tourist has to undertake a journey 'elsewhere' (physical and/or psychological) to experience spirituality. In fact, Singh and Singh (2009) argued that the spiritual journey is as much internally moving as it is physically. For example, in pilgrimage studies the so-called enlightenment may be triggered by an incident, engagement, or a self-disciplining regimen (e.g. abstinence of food or lifestyle), interaction/participation, plain physical movement or sight-seeing, or a combination thereof (Singh & Singh, 2009).

### *Spirituality and the ayahuasca experience*

Despite often being illegal in Western countries, there is a growing recognition that psychedelics are associated with potentially significant health, psychological and spiritual benefits in non-Western societies (Winkelman, 2005). To this end, several studies suggest the experience of ayahuasca is spiritual to non-local participants (Dobkin de Rios, 1994; Krippner & Sulla, 2000; Luna, 1986). The tourist experience generally includes the ceremonial context in which the consumption of ayahuasca happens. During the experience, participants often report a contact of a sacred nature with God, spirits and plant, and natural energies (Winkelman, 2005). Participants may also experience an intensification of positive emotions such as tranquillity and reverence (Anderson et al., 2012) but also somatic effects such as vomiting and diarrhoea (Anderson et al., 2012; Kjellgren, Eriksson, & Norlander, 2009). Participants often describe the experience as a difficult inner battle and/or a frightening psychological experience. Initial phases of intense discomfort are gradually replaced by a sense of euphoria and deep peace (Kjellgren et al., 2009), reinforcing the idea of a spiritual experience (Krippner & Sulla, 2000). Yet, these effects are not surprising given that clinical research on the psychoactive component (DMT) of ayahuasca tea has shown that participants report out-of-body states, mystical experiences, and strong emotions in their exploration and resolution of personal psychological problems (Strassman, 2001).

The extent to which ayahuasca is perceived as a spiritual experience is embedded in the motives of consumption by tourists and locals. For tourists, often detrimentally considered as 'drug tourists' (Dobkin de Rios, 1994), as with indigenous users, the experience of ayahuasca is frequently related to the development of personal self-awareness and physical/emotional healing (Labate & Cavnar, 2014; Winkelman, 2005), including

the treatment of alcoholism and substance abuse (Anderson et al., 2012). Users of ayahuasca also report reasons such as self-exploration, connection with nature and God, expansion of consciousness, and finding purpose/direction in life (Winkelman, 2005) for consumption, that may be regarded as spiritual. Consumption of ayahuasca may also be driven by curiosity and hedonistic motivations (Kirstensen, 1998; Winkelman, 2005).

### *Drug tourism and ayahuasca*

While Western societies have often criminalised the use of ayahuasca (Labate & Feeney, 2012), media depictions of ayahuasca and its consumption for religious purposes are sensationalised with it often portrayed as a dangerous street drug (Anderson et al., 2012). Biomedical studies show no harm in consuming ayahuasca in religious or recreational contexts (Anderson et al., 2012) and the physiological and subjective effects appear relatively benign among long-term regular users (Fábregas et al., 2010). Increasing scientific evidence suggests that ayahuasca is not addictive (Anderson et al., 2012; Fábregas et al., 2010) but most Western tourists visiting ayahuasca retreats and experiencing alternative subcultures (e.g. rave culture) are considered as drug tourists. By definition drug tourists are those aware of the accessibility of illegal drugs in a particular location and consuming these during their stay (Uriely & Belhassen, 2005). Whether these tourists perceive themselves as such is debatable (Belhassen et al., 2007). For some users of ayahuasca, the experience is regarded as a form of 'new age' spirituality (Macrae, 2012). According to this view, the use of psychedelics is not necessarily the main motivation of consumption but enables the experience, whether spiritual or not, to be accessed (Belhassen et al., 2007). Yet evidence exists among users of ayahuasca that it can be consumed with other drugs such as cannabis (Fábregas et al., 2010), meaning that any distinction between 'spiritual' and 'drug' tourist is often an issue of positionality, and potentially may even be futile. A so-called drug tourist experiencing ayahuasca out of curiosity or for recreational purposes may accidentally discover spirituality through its consumption. Hence, any binary distinction between drug [negative] and spiritual [positive] tourist is in reality highly nuanced and fluid in the context of ayahuasca.

### *Tourist encounters, spirituality and ayahuasca practice*

Fisher, Francis, and Johnson (2000) identified four underlying domains of spirituality (personal, communal,

transcendental, and environmental) that is of relevance to understanding tourists' experiences of ayahuasca. According to them, individuals typically prioritise one domain over the others. The personal domain of spirituality is focused on the self, creating self-awareness, identity and esteem. The communal domain is focused on interpersonal relationships between the self and others. In this way, spirituality is 'holistic', involving self-in-relation rather than a self-in-isolation (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). The transcendental domain focuses on the relationship between the self and a god head or other spiritual beings (Fisher et al., 2000). The environmental domain is related to concerns for and nurturing of the natural environment drawing on connectedness to the environment (Fisher et al., 2000). Spirituality is often characterised by a pervasive emphasis on connectedness with self, nature, and culture (Campbell, 2007; Ivakhiv, 2003). For example, the revival of shamanism is part of the worldwide trend of individuals seeking renewal of their spirituality through connectedness with nature (Metzner, 1999).

Ayahuasca practice is symbiotically related to nature (Fotiou, 2010) with rituals and teachings typically emphasising the connections between human and nature (Dobkin de Rios, 1994; Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). However, with increasing tourism, the meanings and practices of ayahuasca are changing. A growing phenomenon is the appearance of 'new shamans' or 'charlatans', and 'neo-shamans', considered by many as a negative tourist encounter (Fotiou, 2010; Homan, 2011), as their practices put at risk the safety of ayahuasca participants (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2008). Media reports on cases of sexual exploitation, abuse of tourists, and unfounded claims of ayahuasca (e.g. curing AIDS) by 'new' shamans have increased (Homan, 2011). 'Neo-shamans' often utilise second-hand knowledge to construct the ayahuasca experience that can be harmful to the mental and physical health of participants (Homan, 2011). These phenomena arise due to the perceived lucrateness of ayahuasca tourism that capitalises on the cultural traditions of Amazonian tribes (Grunwell, 1998).

Related to these phenomena, the rise in the number of female shamans may be a result of both changes in the Peruvian society and female tourists preferring women shamans (Jones, 2006). Shamanism is traditionally male (Fotiou, 2010) and based on a system of knowledge that is passed on via apprenticeship or constructed through continuous interaction with plant spirits (Homan, 2011). In this complex and sometimes contested societal space, this study therefore examines the interspace between spirituality, drugs, and tourism through tourists' experiences of ayahuasca and

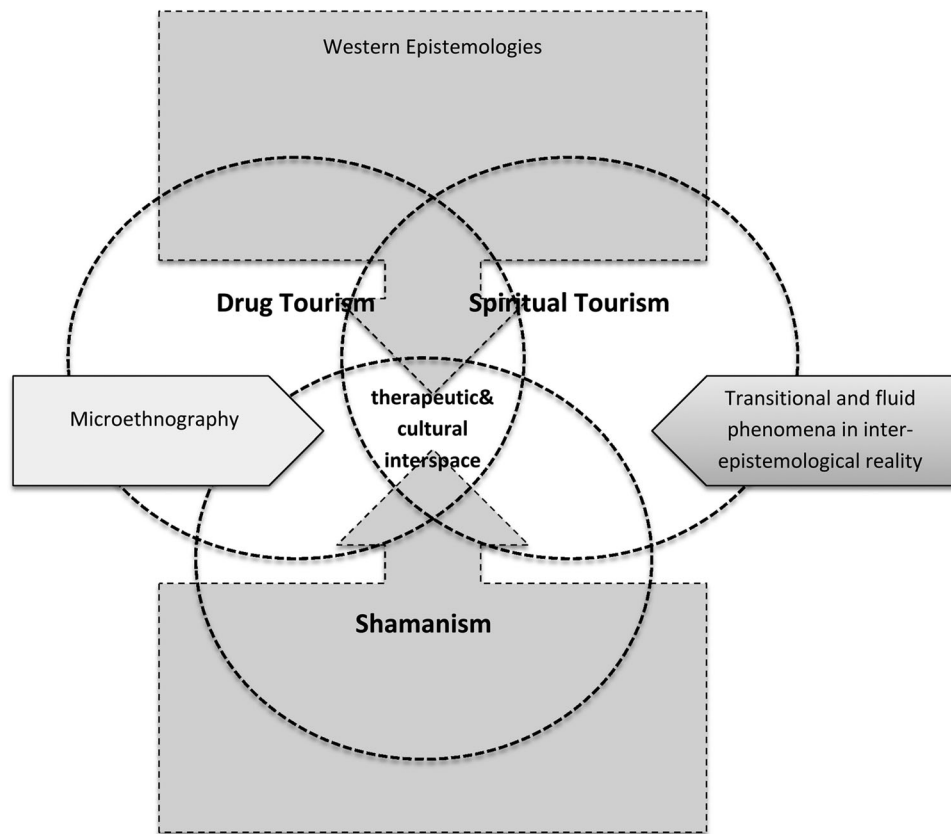
shamans' perspectives on ayahuasca tourism. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the main ways in which ayahuasca tourism can be represented using different epistemological and conceptual frames of reference. Western epistemologies have framed the experience of ayahuasca as either drug or spiritual tourism that can have therapeutic or cultural implications. Indigenous epistemologies (e.g. shamanism) do not make the distinction between drug and spiritual tourism but rather emphasise the therapeutic and cultural experiences of tourists. However, individuals can move between different framings of activities depending on changing contexts as well as experiences over time, suggesting that the spaces between concepts are potentially fluid and therefore challenging more static categorizations of tourist encounters. Micro-ethnography is thus used to understand these different epistemologies and framing of the tourist experience.

## Study methods

### *The field research*

Iquitos is the largest city in the Northern Peruvian jungle and has been a major port in the Amazon Basin. It is the capital city of the Department of Loreto and the Province of Maynas with a population of approximately 900,000, but is considered among the least populated and poorest regions of the country (Fotiou, 2010). This work is guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which ontologically contemplates the existence of multiple realities and epistemologically embraces multiple and subjective ways of knowing. In other words, not only does interpretivism acknowledge subjectivity as part of any research process, it also values it as it contemplates the idea that the 'findings' are co-created or co-produced in the field by the interaction between researcher and participants. The field research was conducted in Iquitos and was based on micro-ethnography (Passariello, 1983). Micro-ethnography is a well-established method that uses an ethnographic approach over a shorter time scale than a traditional ethnography (Creswell, 2007). It also focuses on one location and/or single social situation to explain a phenomenon (Spradley & Baker, 1980). Micro-ethnography is regarded as particularly useful as a methodology for incorporating indigenous worldviews into Western research practices (Loppie, 2007). Drawing on social constructionist and representational approaches (El-Amir & Burt, 2010), micro-ethnography studies how 'human realities are produced, activities are conducted, and sense is made' (Streeck & Mehus, 2005, p. 382). In tourism, micro-ethnography has been used to study, for example, Mexican tourists'





**Figure 1.** The interspace of drug tourism, spiritual tourism, and shamanism.

spirituality in leisure locations (Passariello, 1983) and mature tourists positive emotions (Mitas, Yarnal, & Chick, 2012).

Several qualitative fieldwork source methods (participant observation, informal conversations, formal conversations, and personal diary) were used to understand the touristic experience of ayahuasca (Hall, 2011). Through researcher immersion as a participant observer (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), including engagement in ceremonial activities alongside participants and note-taking, one of the authors was able to comprehend the connection between participants' experiences and 'pervasive patterns' in their social contexts (Creswell, 2007, p. 71). More specifically, in the summer of 2011, one of the authors lived in Iquitos for one month to participate in the experience of ayahuasca and had the opportunity to observe patterns of behaviour during the retreat and to visualise how locals' and tourists' routines unfold in Iquitos. More specifically, the fieldworker's observations were focussed on several aspects, including the physical spaces in which the retreats occurred; the bodily interactions between shamans and tourists; tourists' embodied performances before, during and after the retreats; shamans' performative behaviour before, during and after the rituals; and other aspects related

to the experience (e.g. the clothes worn by shamans and tourists during and after the retreats). Through informal conversations with other participants and shamans, bonds and trust were developed that were useful for the sharing of experiences. Formal conversations with key informants, individuals with profound knowledge about participants' experiences, in this case both tourists and shamans, were used to uncover connections between ayahuasca experiences and spirituality. The personal diary allowed the recording of observations of others, informal conversations, reflections on each ceremony, and thoughts about self.

### *The 'conversation' protocol*

The conversation with tourists began on several broad questions to contextualise their experiences. The conversation protocol included questions such as 'What do you know about ayahuasca?' and 'Why did you want to experience ayahuasca?' in order to identify motives of consumption based on Winkelman's (2005) study. To appreciate how the experience of ayahuasca is spiritual, the following question was asked: 'How is ayahuasca changing or changed you?' The conversation protocol for shamans was different and included questions such

as 'What benefits the local community get from ayahuasca tourism?' and 'What are the consequences of ayahuasca tourism?', and 'What is the impact of tourism on traditional practices of ayahuasca?' Probing was used to understand and clarify tourist and shaman views, thoughts, and perceptions.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, consent was obtained for participation but no tape recording of conversations undertaken. Thus, the researcher engaged in extensive note-taking following conventions suggested for ethnographic studies (Emerson et al., 1995). Given that one of the researchers is proficient in three languages, tourists had the option of being interviewed in either English or French while shamans were interviewed in either English or Spanish. The back-translation method (Brislin, 1970) was used to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts both in content and meaning. The names of participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

### The study participants

Contemporary individual seekers of spirituality, sometimes referred to as 'new agers', are concerned with personal transformation and growth instead of religion and are most likely 'white, educated [and] middle class' (Holman, 2011, pp. 99–100). Almost all tourists interviewed were well experienced with ayahuasca but had somewhat different motives for consumption (Table 1). The term 'religious' is quite inappropriate for ayahuasca, despite some claiming that tourists who drink ayahuasca exemplify a 'modern secular pilgrimage', the fact remains that the main motive of participation is neither connected to a specific religion nor to a sacred site (Digance, 2003). The researcher was deliberately open about the research and his dual role as both researcher and participant.

Only six participants agreed to be formally interviewed. The relatively low level of participation is

explained by the intensely personal nature of the experience and the complex process of isolation and self-reflection by the tourist, making it difficult to share the experience with others. The five indigenous shaman (four males and one female) participants were interviewed at the end of the researcher's stay at the retreat using a purposive sampling basis. They were from the local community in Iquitos and experienced in conducting ayahuasca ceremonies with a minimum of seven years and a maximum of eighteen years of ayahuasca practice. The shamans generally referred to ceremony participants as 'patients' rather than 'tourists' and were involved in the rituals of the 'patients' interviewed in this study. Importantly, all shamans interviewed and observed identified themselves as 'indigenous people'.

All participants (tourists) were interviewed as part of a formal conversation at the end of their stay at the retreat for several reasons. First, the purpose of the formal conversation was to complement participant observation that had already taken place over the one-month period. Second, to obtain a holistic view, participants had to reflect on their ayahuasca experience. The end of their stay was an opportune moment as this reflection was almost complete and might have changed the meaning and significance of the experience itself. Third, given that the researcher was consuming ayahuasca during the stay, the end of stay was an opportune time for reflection on his own experience and that of others, which facilitated the interviewing process.

### Data collection and data analysis

The micro-ethnographic component of the study included participant observation and conversations with key informants on-site (tourists and shamans) at an ayahuasca retreat in Iquitos. Notes were recorded in the personal diary before and after each ceremony (Emerson et al., 1995; Hall, 2011). Unlike standard interviewing procedures that are time bound, conversation

**Table 1.** Summary of participants' demographics and main motives for experiencing ayahuasca.

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality	Number of previous ayahuasca experiences	Main reason(s) for experiencing ayahuasca
Participant 1 (P1)	34	Male	American	4	'purge myself of modern lifestyle'; 'stay healthy'
Participant 2 (P2)	36	Female	French	2	'spiritual experience'; 'safety of body and spirit'
Participant 3 (P3)	35	Male	French	1	'learn about the plant and the forest'; 'medicinal effects' of the plant; 'deeper understanding of ayahuasca'
Participant 4 (P4)	28	Female	Romanian	0	'studying alternative medicine'; 'own personal benefit and future job'
Participant 5 (P5)	39	Male	French	1	'self-discovery'
Participant 6 (P6)	41	Male	French	3	'purge myself of the negative elements of modern day life'

time was unconstrained in the retreat. Participants spent most of the day thinking or meditating and informal conversations ranged from ten minutes and up to one hour or more. The formal conversations lasted in general more than one hour and at times extended over two hours. Interpretive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. The transcripts were analysed independently by two of the researchers and the emergent themes were similar in most of the cases.

## Findings

### *Tourists' encounters with spirituality*

All six tourists' account of their encounter with ayahuasca centred mostly on personal benefits. The findings highlight that ayahuasca rituals tend to emphasise introspection in general. In this respect, all participants described ayahuasca as a 'spiritual journey' or 'sacred ritual' that cannot be experienced in Western countries. 'Westerners want to find a sacred spirituality lost in Europe' (P1). When probed on the meaning of this statement, it was clear that the participant (P1) wanted to reconnect with his lost spirituality. This idea of connectedness is also present in other participants' motives of consuming ayahuasca. For example, another participant described the ayahuasca experience as 'a journey of self-exploration and spiritual rejuvenation to find herself' (P2). Participant four mentioned that '[ayahuasca] is a rest from the stressing life that I have. It is a breath of fresh air and gives me a lot of energy' (P4). The need for (re)connection with 'self' seems to be related to the stress caused by the general pace of life and cultural conditioning in the West teaching rationality and materialism, thus creating a void that needs to be filled by spirituality.

Ayahuasca is spiritual to participants because of the physical, psychological, and social changes experienced. One of the participants, for example, emphasised the physical benefits of ayahuasca by claiming that 'the physical purge is so good as well' (P2). On a psychological level, the emotional state of participants described as 'relaxed' and 'peaceful' along with the psychological effects (e.g. visualisations and reflection on life) of ceremonies and rituals reinforced participants' beliefs that ayahuasca is a spiritual experience. All participants mentioned how ayahuasca contributed to 'new ways of thinking' (P2) or, 'a different state of mind' (P3).

The social changes attributed to ayahuasca were related to the way shamans interacted with participants through practices or rituals on the group (e.g. singing, relaxation, and meditation). These interactions were perceived as encouraging or facilitating not only changes in

the self but also helped in understanding personal relationships with others. 'Others' were also described as family and friends at home but also the broader society, including locals from Iquitos. In this regard, one of the participants stated: '... I came here to drink ayahuasca to make a connection between me and the locals' (P3). In this way, ayahuasca offered participants the opportunity to transform or understand self and enhance personal relationships that could potentially facilitate the integration of the self in the wider community back home. The shamans, thus, become the cultural brokers of spirituality, without whom, the change in self is incomplete.

### *Tourists' encounters with nature*

Ayahuasca changed the way participants perceived their relationship with nature during and after the experience. Two participants claimed they no more perceived 'nature' as dangerous and hostile after the experience. Two other participants also viewed 'la selva' (the Amazonian jungle) as a welcoming and fragile entity in which people, animals and plants are connected:

My relationship with nature has changed. I was not aware of sustainability before, now that I have lived in the jungle, I appreciate it more and feel connected to it more ... (P2)

I think the plant reconciles me with nature. (P4)

While none of the participants' motives for ayahuasca tourism involved a (re)discovery of divinity, the experience, however, made them reflect on a God-like entity related to nature and experienced through ayahuasca consumption. Ayahuasca seems to bring forth intense emotions, enhanced lucidity, and increased vividness of closed-eye visualisations that participants associated with a spiritual experience. To participants, both positive (e.g. happiness and tranquillity) and negative (e.g. fear and shame) emotions, and the fluidity of these emotions reflected nature's way of achieving balance, common to spiritual rather than emotional experiences.

The spiritual experience through this renewed relationship with nature also seemed to influence participants intended behaviour beyond the retreat. For example, participant four claimed that the experience of ayahuasca helped him to overcome racial prejudices he had before leaving his homeland (France):

During my first ceremony, I had the feeling I could not trust the shaman. It is hard to say this, but I think I was blocked by the image of an indigenous in a developing country. (P4)

By admitting the validity of shamanic knowledge during the ceremony, participant four claimed to have changed



his view of the indigenous world and its people. To him, ayahuasca is also the discovery and acceptance of the 'other', not just 'physically' but also with respect to their world-view. Interestingly, the change in mind-set about indigenous people, their rituals, and the subsequent trust in them by Western tourists, also seemed to have strengthened ethnic and cultural identity of the host community.

### *Tourists' encounters with other tourists*

All participants were aware, at least by the end of their stay, that the growing number of tourists in Iquitos and ayahuasca retreats has potentially negative impacts on the practice of ayahuasca. As participant two mentioned:

I don't like the fact that now it [ayahuasca] is a business. It will ruin the tradition and the culture of the indigenous people here. I am sure they [indigenous people] need some money, but this is a pity. (P2)

The idea that ayahuasca tourism may eventually destroy local cultures and traditions related to the practice of ayahuasca was common to four participants. Yet, there seems to be a paradox between participants' perceptions of their own impacts as tourists and the impacts of others. All participants seem to override the negative with the positive impacts of ayahuasca on the self. Community interests tend to be secondary to personal benefits of ayahuasca. In this way, the introspection and the journey of self-discovery may foster ego-centrism, whereby leaving the retreat as a 'better' person may be more important than the 'betterment' of the community.

### *Encounters between spiritual and the drug tourist*

While noting an increase in the number of 'drug tourists', participants did not equate *their* experiences as drug tourism. Three participants were adamant that ayahuasca is not consumed 'just for fun' or for 'mere escape or pleasure'. According to these participants, drug tourists are seeking ayahuasca for recreation or pleasure and not spiritual purposes. As participant two mentioned:

[...] we can find people coming to drink ayahuasca only for fun ... I mean they see this as a drug. It is a big mistake and these people are very disorientated by the experience. Every time I meet somebody like that I try to warn him. (P2)

The participants perceived themselves as the 'good' tourist because of their quest for spirituality while labelling others seeking ayahuasca for recreational purposes as the 'bad' tourist. The participants believed that the

'spiritual' tourist has limited impact on ayahuasca practice while the 'drug' tourist contributes to the commercialisation and 'pollution' of the practice. Surprisingly, none of the participants were conscious of the fact that they, as individual tourists (whether 'good' or 'bad'), contribute to the perceived negative effects of changed cultural practices.

### *The shamans' encounters with tourists*

The idea that tourism is somehow a double-edged sword for the practice of ayahuasca is evident among shamans, given the benefits and negative consequences of tourism. Four shamans considered tourists as 'patients' seeking cures for the ills of modern society (e.g. materialism and stress) and the healing of such patients represented a new trajectory in traditional shamanic practices for them. Indeed, the renewal of traditional culture through tourism activity is the most significant positive dimension of ayahuasca tourism identified by the shamans. For generations, shamans have been transmitting to others (including younger shamans) their knowledge about the use of plants and ayahuasca rituals to heal people (Fotiou, 2010). As suggested by the shamans, adoption of such knowledge has been decreasing, but tourism has renewed interest among the younger generations to learn shamanic practices.

Three shamans mentioned that the increasing number of Western tourists in Iquitos has contributed to what they refer to as a 'positive evolution' in the practice of ayahuasca given that Westerners often have different reasons for drinking ayahuasca than locals.

For the past 10 or 15 years, we feel an evolution. Thanks to the growing documentaries, Internet etc. more information is available on ayahuasca. People have more knowledge today and want to experience it. (S1)

Two shamans claimed that they have learnt how to heal new 'problems', mainly 'imported' by Western tourists, such as sexual abuse, stress of daily life and work related uncertainties.

I learnt how to heal the diseases from the West. Stress, competition and all this anxiety is brought by you westerners in the jungle, and we learn how to treat that. (S3)  
I think it is good we have western people here. We discovered new diseases and new social or psychological issues. It makes us more efficient with the experience. (S5)

Traditionally, shamans have been reluctant to heal patients with sexual abuse, still considered a 'taboo' in the community. Two shamans perceived the arrival of Western tourists very positively as it allowed them to gain new insights and expand their knowledge on the

positive effects of ayahuasca. As a consequence, the two shamans are ready to apply these new healing practices to locals as well. In this way, they are breaking some of the taboo surrounding sexual abuse and abusive relationships in their own community.

### *Negative consequences of tourism*

All the shamans expressed concerns about the commercialisation and commodification of ayahuasca practices. As one shaman reported:

The impact of tourism is stronger now, [...] before I had one tourist asking to drink ayahuasca more than 3 times a week ... now a whole group of tourists ask me! ... it's more of a business nowadays. [...] (S2)

As ayahuasca becomes increasingly a 'commoditised' product sold to Western tourists for both spiritual and recreational purposes, rivalry and competitive behaviour has become common among shamans. The competition to attract more tourists takes several forms, including shamans' attempts at offering their practice at competitive prices. As suggested by one shaman, this detracts from the purpose and meaning of ayahuasca practice, which is to heal patients. These shamans clearly identified themselves as the 'real' cultural brokers of ayahuasca and blamed others for inauthentic experiences.

[...] charlatans can lead to the destruction of ayahuasca, or at least a huge alteration of the spiritual side of the practice. (S1)

Contradictory views of tourism also exist among shamans. One of the shamans, for example, mentioned that tourism has led to job creation. However, he questions whether his employees are merely lured by economic benefits or a genuine interest in the practice of ayahuasca.

Two shamans perceived encounters with tourists as increasingly difficult to manage given that first-time ayahuasca participants are often doubtful of shamans and ayahuasca due to charlatans practising ayahuasca. Yet, the two shamans admit engaging in staged performance to satisfy tourist expectations. Traditional costumes are worn for ceremonies involving tourists to appear as 'natives'. Different rituals are performed depending on the type of 'client' to satisfy authenticity-related expectations. The two shamans also showed concern for the increasing globalisation of ayahuasca, which detaches the beverage from its origin and rituals. The two shamans are adamant that the positive effects of ayahuasca can only materialise when a shaman conducts the ceremony in Peru, highlighting the potential

importance of place and the role of the cultural broker in facilitating the experience.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The study sought to answer two questions: (1) In what way(s) is the tourism experience of ayahuasca spiritual to tourists?; and, (2) How do tourists and shamans perceive ayahuasca tourism? The findings suggest the existence of three spiritual domains that qualify the tourism experience of ayahuasca as spiritual. The first domain, personal (Hill et al., 2000), relates to participants quest for positive changes to the self through physical and/or psychological healing and supports previous studies (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011; Singh & Singh, 2009) arguing that the touristic experience may encompass a sense of renewal or rejuvenating aspects that make the experience spiritual.

The second domain, environmental, reflects concerns for the environment and the need for individuals to both understand and nurture how the self is part and parcel of the natural environment (Fisher et al., 2000). Ayahuasca participants associated the experience with feelings of connectedness to nature, which is not uncommon to tourism experiences described as spiritual (Willson et al., 2013) or pilgrimages (Singh & Singh, 2009). Beside the ceremonies and rituals surrounding ayahuasca, the touristic context including the communal living contributed to participants perceiving the experience as spiritual. This has been described as the communal domain of spirituality (Fisher et al., 2000) that allows participants to understand self through interpersonal relationships, which is also common to studies on pilgrimages (Singh & Singh, 2009). Hence, the personal, environmental, and communal domains of spirituality contribute to establish that drug-induced tourism experiences such as ayahuasca can be spiritual to tourists.

The spiritual aspects of ayahuasca are also reinforced by strong positive and negative emotions experienced during ceremonies and rituals. Spiritual experiences of tourists are generally associated with heightened emotional engagement (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Singh & Singh, 2009). For ayahuasca tourists, these emotions qualify the experience as transformative but such perceptions may also reflect the way ayahuasca is commodified and marketed (Holman, 2011). The spiritual aspects of the experience as perceived by participants can also be linked to the motives of participation such as the need to get away from 'routine' and 'materialistic environments'.

The findings also highlight that the intersectoral space (s) between drug tourism, spiritual tourism, and shamanism is one that is fluid (time, space, and context), and

dependent on the perspective of both shamans and tourists as suggested in Figure 1. The context in which the drug is consumed is therefore critical for both external and self-labelling of tourism roles (Belhassen et al., 2007; Uriely & Belhassen, 2005). As suggested in these studies, there are nuances in the experiences of tourists who consume so-called drugs and thus labelling them as either drug or spiritual tourist is often futile. As suggested by the findings of this study, a deeper understanding of the motives, emotions and behaviours is required for external identification of tourism roles.

From tourists' perspectives, the discourse (re)produced seems to be mainly based on the perception that spirituality is a 'serious matter' and should not be associated with the more mundane drug-induced pleasurable experiences. Tourists engaging in the latter behaviour are perceived as potentially compromising the 'sacred' aspects and a threat to ayahuasca. The tourist discourse appears to mirror a demonising and moralising perspective on drugs that does not seek to reconcile the potential relationship between spirituality and psychedelic substances (Griffiths, Richards, McCann, & Jesse, 2008; Lerner & Lyvers, 2006). A transformative proximity to nature and indigenous people's values and knowledge is also claimed through the ayahuasca experience. Yet, tourists' narratives are unclear as to what extent they are willing to compromise their Western values in the longer term and seem to reproduce scripts in which the 'colonising world' and its imbued values struggle to fully embrace the 'colonised' cultural practices of ayahuasca.

At a time when there is substantial health and medical interest in ayahuasca (Labate & Cavnar, 2014) the study also highlights the role of psychedelics in inducing spiritual experiences. Awareness of the changing positionalities of ayahuasca users potentially helps to deconstruct some of the positive/negative frames within which tourism and drug use are sometimes constructed to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the fluidity of identities in the tourism and drug encounter, and representations of the encounter itself (Aaslid, 2008). The tourist encounter with ayahuasca seems to confront participants with multi-angled, reflections of self in motion within their wider life course, and it is perhaps from this reflection on self that meaning is gained as suggested in previous studies (e.g. Medhat, 2012).

Critically with respect to the fluidity of positioning, participants in this study profess that ayahuasca can better the self but there is no convincing evidence that ayahuasca leads to a fundamental long-term change in tourists' social outlook and/or environmental behaviour once they have left the interspace of Western and

indigenous epistemologies and drug and spiritual tourism. In fact, the repeated visits to ayahuasca retreats may well suggest a lack of permanency in personal change. Yet these temporary and fluid encounters with ayahuasca remain meaningful and spiritual for participants.

From shamans' perspectives, ayahuasca tourism has both positive and negative impacts on the meaning and practices of ayahuasca. The positive social impacts of ayahuasca tourism such as employment opportunities for locals; renewed interest of the younger generation in ayahuasca practice; and, importantly, the treatment of locals for illnesses and psychological distress long considered taboo in the community of Iquitos, have not been discussed in previous studies (see Winkelman, 2005) on ayahuasca tourism. Also, ayahuasca tourism seems to foster a sense of community identity among shamans through the strengthening of rituals and the creation of mythology that reinforces indigenous culture.

While acknowledging that tourism contributes positively to community development, they are also aware of the negative impacts of tourism on their cultural practices and worldviews. For shamans, globalisation and commercialisation of ayahuasca practices beyond Iquitos are perceived as significant threats to the power and indigenous epistemologies of shamans. While not necessarily being 'inauthentic', such practices are perceived as potentially harmful to tourists and cultural traditions, weakening both cultural and community identity and knowledge. In a sense, shamans are the cultural brokers of ayahuasca deciding on which aspects of the experience should be emphasised or deemphasised to various tourist groups to maintain authenticity.

In conclusion, the findings open several avenues for further research. Perhaps because of the moral and political contestation surrounding the role of drugs in contemporary society, research on spiritual tourism which is predominantly conducted on Western tourists has seemingly ignored the relationships between spirituality and drugs in traditional societies. Hence, research that are carried within the interspace between Western and indigenous epistemologies may potentially be important not only for health and well-being, but also for an improved understanding of positionality in tourism. Another area of research that may be valuable is to track the long-term personal and social impacts of ayahuasca tourism in the home environment of the tourist. Relatively, a much understudied area of tourism fieldwork (Hall, 2011) is to track the long-term effects of the fieldwork experiences of participant researchers and the return home. With respect to settings that allow the relationship between tourism experiences and spirituality to be identified, rural tourism, religious tourism,

and drug tourism have been at the forefront but other touristic settings such as heritage (e.g. Matheson, Rimmer, & Tinsley, 2014) and dark tourism should also be investigated. Also, studies are needed on the nexus of emotional engagement and spirituality in tourist experiences.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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